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"It's All One Big Circle": Welfare Discourse and the Everyday Lives of Urban Adolescents

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Welfare reform succeeded, in part, because of discourse that characterized the poverty problem as one of long-term dependency and personal irresponsibility. Adolescent pregnancy was targeted as both cause and manifestation of a welfare crisis. This study examined how welfare reform was perceived and experienced by low-income, urban adolescents. Findings from interviews revealed that adolescents agreed with many of the basic tenets of welfare reform, largely because they had appropriated much of the discourse prevalent in wider society. However, their complex life stories contained a powerful subtext concerning structural determinants of poverty that ran counter to prevailing notions of "personal responsibility."

Key words: *Welfare reform, adolescents, poverty, teen mothers, welfare discourse*

Introduction

It has been more than ten years since U.S. policymakers enacted federal welfare reform legislation. Known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), this policy fundamentally altered the

nature and structure of social welfare provision for the poor. The rationale for making such sweeping change to the existing system was based in part on research, but also on powerful discourse concerning the nature of poverty and its remedy. PRWORA was characterized by its punitive approach to the management of welfare recipients' behaviors. It stipulated several stringent requirements (e.g, work participation and time limits) and gave states the flexibility to implement harsh sanctions (e.g., family cap) for non-compliance with the new rules. While legislators targeted several of the new regulations squarely at adults receiving benefits, and made requirements for teen parents a centerpiece of the legislation, they also made implicit assumptions about how these new policy provisions would affect the *future* behavior of low-income children and adolescents. Despite this foundational assumption, little was known about the ability of low-income adolescents to process cognitively this abstract policy concept known as welfare reform, much less apply its strict behavioral prescriptions to their daily lives.

Scientific inquiry, of course, does not take place in a vacuum and is influenced by institutional power relations and social context. Discourse surrounding welfare reform and the social scientific analyses chosen to legitimate it masked other discourses of resistance and alternative forms of evidence. As O'Connor argues, the problem was approached "within the narrow conceptual frame of individual failings rather than structural inequality" (2001, p. 4). While there was a plethora of research used to support links between, for example, teenage pregnancy and welfare receipt, there were also important research perspectives missing. Studies that were ignored, discredited, or misused could have provided a much fuller and more complex understanding of the problems facing poor families. But, in large part, the science that did not fit with the politics was not included in debate.

This study aimed to investigate the capacity of low-income, urban adolescents to understand and apply the messages of large-scale welfare policy change. Its purpose was to see how adolescents were perceiving and experiencing changes resulting from welfare reform. While the study included the perspectives of both males and females, there was particular

attention paid to the gendered nature of welfare discourse, its corresponding public policies, and the lived experiences of poor families. The study was framed within a contextual model of adolescent development, which recognizes the importance of social interaction in shaping cognitive processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Keating, 1990). In line with sociological theories of "the everyday" this research was centered on listening to adolescents' stories in their own words and trying to interpret meaning within the context of their daily, lived experiences. The data presented here are drawn from multiple in-depth interviews with low-income adolescents living in Boston. Findings from these interviews revealed that adolescents agreed with many of the basic tenets of welfare reform, largely because they had appropriated much of the discourse prevalent in wider society. However, their complex life stories contained a profound, co-existing subtext concerning structural determinants of poverty that ran counter to prevailing notions of "personal responsibility."

These findings challenge the proclaimed "success" of welfare reform efforts that have echoed throughout policy and academic circles for the past several years. Because the logic of welfare reform was based on a set of dichotomous indicators that could be measured through survey methodology and administrative data (e.g., being on or off the rolls; having an additional child or not), it was easy for some audiences to declare success, if not "victory." Such outcomes, however, have been experienced far differently by many of the women and children affected by welfare reform. For example, moving off the rolls, even with employment, does not necessarily mean moving out of poverty; punishing mothers for having an additional child while on welfare only makes the material hardship of daily life more pronounced for already struggling families. In the case of the present study, adolescents' seeming acceptance of welfare reform precepts was not realistic in the face of their complex daily lives and the structural barriers that shape them.

Discursive Framings of Welfare

The standard method for defining the "welfare problem" was to provide key social and economic indicators related

to the receipt of public assistance. It was, in part, this form of scientific argument that eventually led to the passage of PRWORA. This way of defining the problem included data on: caseload growth during the period 1960-1996, increasing rates of nonmarital teenage pregnancy and childbearing, changing demographics of those on the welfare rolls, increasing federal outlays for welfare programs, and the socioeconomic consequences of growing up in a welfare household. The research used for this purpose was almost entirely quantitative (see Blank, Burtless, Dickens, Pavetti, & Rom, 1995; Brown & Eisenberg, 1995; Maynard, 1996; O'Neill & O'Neill, 1997; Parnell, Swicegood, & Stevens, 1994). Moreover, while the breadth of research topics being covered may have seemed adequate, many of the specific questions guiding welfare policy research had not evolved over time (McClintock & Lowe, 2001, 2007). Analyses of large national data sets and reviews of routinely collected administrative data were employed to set the parameters of the welfare problem while limited results from randomized studies of welfare-to-work demonstrations helped set the agenda for a work-first approach. Policymakers drew heavily from trends in the welfare caseload, as well as from patterns of nonmarital adolescent pregnancy, to help construct the discourse of "welfare dependency" (An, Haveman, & Wolfe, 1993; Haveman, Wolfe, & Peterson, 1996; Horwitz, Klerman, Kuo, & Jekel, 1991; Moore, Morrison, & Greene, 1996; O'Neill, Bassi, & Wolf, 1987; U.S. DHHS, 2000).

While numerous facts and figures were used to make the case for welfare reform, there was an additional force at work, namely, the power of neoconservative welfare discourse. In much of this discourse, there remained intact an *us* and *them* mentality that labeled those on welfare as deviant and thus responsible for their own dependency. As Asen, following Foucault, noted in an early article on welfare reform:

> Discourse enables and constrains, includes and excludes, centers and marginalizes because of its ineluctable association with power and knowledge. Foucault explains that discourse is the site through which formations of power/knowledge exercise their normalizing functions, which prescribe, among other

> things, who may speak and what may be spoken about. (1996, p. 295)

The welfare reform debate had become incredibly limited in its theorization and vocabulary. O'Connor describes this as the power "to exercise ideological hegemony over the boundaries of political discourse" (2001, p. 17). Notions of "illegitimacy" and "dependence" and "irresponsibility" became the parameters within which all discussion was forced to take place. Mills (1996) attributes the assignment of such labels to conservatives who wished to build public support for punitive measures. The construction of these images was held in the hands of the powerful, the elite, those most interested in maintaining the status quo (Asen, 1996; Cocca, 2002; Lens, 2002). By extension, those left out of public debate were those being stigmatized by the dominant ideology. As Asen (1996) and Lens (2002) point out, even though welfare recipients are those with the most to say about the daily realities and hardships and have the most stake in policy change, their perspectives are generally left out of public deliberation. In the case of welfare, those most at stake were, of course, poor women and their children. As presciently noted by Nancy Fraser in 1987,

> The "coming welfare wars" will be largely wars about, even against, women....Only in terms of a discourse oriented to the politics of need interpretation can feminists meaningfully intervene in the coming welfare wars. But this requires a challenge to the dominant policy framework. (pp. 103-104)

Unfortunately, Fraser's vision for such a challenge to the status quo did not occur. In fact, social scientific research was used to legitimate and fuel welfare discourse leading up to PRWORA by constructing marginalized objects (e.g., adolescent mothers) and appropriate methods (e.g., secondary analysis of national administrative datasets) of investigation. The issue of teenage pregnancy held front and center stage in the debates leading up to reform. Because this population (i.e., teen mothers) was also central to the present study, the following describes the dominant framing of the problem and

illustrates how alternative discourses that would have been useful for effective policy making were omitted.

Nonmarital teen pregnancy was deemed the nation's most pressing social problem and served as the primary reason for enacting welfare reform. No doubt, the U.S. has a high rate of teen pregnancy in comparison to similar nations. However, casting it as the problem driving all other social ills has been questioned along several fronts (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). First, there is epidemiological data that suggests it may not be the age of the mother per se that leads to negative outcomes for their children, but rather the impact of socioeconomic background (Geronimus & Korenman, 1992; Hotz, McElroy, & Sanders, 1996). Research has also suggested that teen childbearing among African American women may be a cultural adaptive strategy, because these women are much more likely to have negative birth outcomes when they are older (Geronimus, 2003). Wilcox, Robbennolt, O'Keefe, and Pynchon (1996) noted that many welfare reform efforts were based on the belief that the system had created an "incentive effect" for nonmarital births, particularly for adolescents, but they concluded that such an effect did not exist. This position was corroborated in a report by the Institute of Medicine which stated that "the empirical literature does not lend support to the popular perception that AFDC and other income transfer programs exert an important influence on nonmarital fertility" (Brown & Eisenberg, 1995, p. 198). Finally, recall how the architects of PRWORA advanced abstinence-only educational programs despite the widely-acknowledged dearth of evidence to support this approach (Kirby, 1997; Moore, Miller, Morrison, Glei, & Blumenthal, 1995).

While researchers outside of the mainstream policy analysis framework were not successful in reframing policy discussions at the time of welfare reform, there is now an opportunity to examine welfare reform's effects and influence future anti-poverty strategies. Fortunately, there has emerged a relatively small but important body of literature that more critically examines constructions of the "welfare recipient" or "teen mother" underlying welfare reform language (Jimenez, 1999; Hawkesworth, 1999; Williams, 1995). This focus on the discourse and meta-constructs of welfare and poverty, rather

than programs or policies, came largely in response to what many considered an invalid depiction of the lives, beliefs, and motivations of poor women. At the heart of such scholarship is a focus on women's everyday experience of welfare, a critical stance towards mainstream dependency discourse, an appreciation for the care work done by women, and an acknowledgement of the power of structural forces (particularly race, class, and gender) and how they interact with individual identities and experiences (Albelda, 2001; Brush, 2003; Christopher, 2004). Implicit in empirical work of this nature is a respect for, and reliance upon, local knowledge and insiders' perspectives (see Coley, Kuta, & Chase-Lansdale, 2000; Dodson, 1998; Edin & Lien, 1997; Rains, Davies, & McKinnon, 1998; Seccombe, James, & Walters 1998). The present study is situated within this body of research.

Methods

The data presented in this paper are drawn from multiple, in-depth interviews that were conducted in 2002 and 2003 at the Center for Success (CFS) [names of institutions and individuals have been altered to maintain confidentiality], a Boston-based alternative educational and social service agency. The author recruited participants by conducting two informational sessions at the CFS during which she explained the purposes of the study, criteria for inclusion, and the rights and responsibilities associated with participation. The sample of youth consisted of fourteen adolescents. Eleven were female and three were male. All participants were either African American or Hispanic/Latino(a). Most participants were teen parents. Written consent was obtained prior to the start of all interviews. Each interview was approximately one hour in length. Most interviews were conducted on-site at the Center for Success, while others were held in participants' homes or public venues. Some of the follow-up interviews took place over the phone due to scheduling difficulties. With the permission of participants, both in-person and phone interviews were tape recorded.

The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions meant to elicit in-depth, personal

responses from participants. The first part of the interview followed a life history framework. Participants were asked questions about their childhood and about their relationships with family and friends. Once these personal life histories had been established, the interview moved into discussion of welfare reform—how welfare had influenced their lives, what they thought of reform, which provisions they were familiar with, and how reform was currently affecting their lives. Follow-up interviews were conducted to see how participants' circumstances had changed since the first interview, to ask questions that had been omitted the first time, and to probe deeper into certain issues that emerged during a review of the first interview. The study also included brief, impromptu cell phone interviews which were helpful in following up with participants on questions that emerged after the first interview and for gaining an understanding of the everyday struggles and accomplishments they experienced.

A multi-staged, systematic process was used to analyze the qualitative data from interviews. Before doing any cross-case comparisons, a case analysis for each interview was compiled (Patton, 1990). This process allowed for an understanding of variation among participants to emerge more clearly during the cross-case analysis. Most of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, in their totality. In some cases, certain passages were transcribed verbatim and the rest of the data were summarized. (The latter procedure was necessary because of the poor audio quality on some of the tapes.) The interview transcripts were analyzed in two ways. First, the key constructs of interest, identified a priori, were identified and then coded across different, more specific, dimensions. Following this process, a more inductive, grounded theory approach was used to identify concepts that did not fit into the a priori categorization scheme (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The cumulative results of these processes formed the basis of the study's conclusions.

Findings

First, findings are presented that relate to two specific policy provisions (i.e., time limits and work requirements), which are

a small subset of those covered in the full study. Then data on topics not directly related to welfare reform but that illustrate some of the key contextual factors shaping adolescents' lives are presented. In the final part of this section, the intersections of these policy topics with contextual issues and analyis of their relevance in light of wider structural problems endemic to the urban poor are revisted.

Time Limits

Massachusetts adopted a time limit law that was even stricter than the federal government's requirement. In the Commonwealth, one could only receive benefits for two years in a continuous five year period. Overall, youth in the study supported the notion of time limits, but their endorsement was usually qualified in some way. (Most of the mothers in the sample were actually exempt from this requirement because their youngest child was less than two years of age.) They thought that the amount of time on welfare should be limited, but that the rule should not be applied uniformly to all people, since situations vary from one case to another. The point at which participants' support for time limits began to diminish was when they considered how the policy might affect their educational aspirations. As participants were well aware, the two-year time limit in Massachusetts made it virtually impossible for a young mother on welfare to complete a four-year degree.

Participants' experience with and knowledge of the specifics of the time limits policy varied quite substantially. In the case of Anessa, time limits were a constantly looming presence. Her eldest child was five years old and her youngest was seventeen months at the time of the first interview. Anessa was twenty years old and knew that her time limits would start when she reached age twenty-one or finished her GED, whichever came first. Since her youngest child was a "cap baby" (a term used by participants to describe children who were subject to the family cap), and she did not receive any financial support from the children's father, times were very tough. With two GED tests remaining and the time limits clock lurking around the corner, Anessa felt particularly stressed and rushed. On the other end of the spectrum were participants who knew about

the time limits in a general sense, but had no idea how they applied to their particular situation. When I asked Mya if she knew when her time clock would start ticking, she replied, "You know, that's something I really need to find out, cause I really don't know."

Gabriela's (age 18) views on time limits were representative of those expressed by many other participants. Particularly interesting in her case was the multiplicity of perspectives held, all of which were revealed gradually throughout the course of our first interview. For example, Gabriela's comments initially mirrored wider stereotypes about welfare recipients as "lazy" individuals who remain "dependent" on the system for a long time:

> Oh my god, I was always the number-one person saying, "I'm never gonna go on welfare. I'm not lazy. I don't need anybody. All you have to do is get a job" and all this....Before, I know that people would just sit on welfare and collect and collect.

Unlike some participants, Gabriela was able to articulate the nuances of the time limits policy. She clearly demonstrated her knowledge of how welfare had changed since the implementation of reform, in terms of both time limits and work requirements. For example, she explained:

> Now they have programs. You gotta get up, you gotta get out in two years. They're gonna help you for two years. If, if you haven't helped yourself in two years, if you haven't done anything with yourself, they'll give you the money but once those two years are up, that's it. You're off the system and you can't get help anymore. That's it. You only have two years. You have to get a job. They, they offer job training and you know, there's all kinds of things that you can do, but if you don't do it in two years, then, too bad for you.

Despite this initial sounding of support for time limits, when pressed further, respondents often modified their response and articulated a more tempered view that called for attention to the specific circumstances of participants' lives.

Gabriela, for example, refined her argument to say that, while the policy is good idea in theory, the system through which it is administered must be flexible. She explained:

> I definitely think that [there should be a time limit on welfare]. But it should be for each case. Like, on a case-to-case, you know, basis...Like, there shouldn't be a standard. Like, I think you have to look at everyone's personal situation. Some people are gonna need a little bit more help than other people...I think you should help them a little longer.

In the end, it seemed that Gabriela probably would have placed herself in this "special case" category. This made sense because, at the time of our interviews, she was living in a homeless shelter for teens who had experienced domestic violence, trying to finish her high school education, and caring for an infant who, for several months, had been in the neonatal intensive care unit of a local hospital. When I asked Gabriela to reflect on how she was dealing with the many welfare-related pressures on her mind, she replied, "I don't know. I'm just focusing. So it's not like I have time to be feeling anything. It's like, you gotta get this done and that's it. There's no time to feel."

Work Requirements

The notion of having to work in exchange for benefits is one which study participants generally supported. However, participants in this study were exempt from this particular requirement because their children were less than 6 years of age. There was an obvious appropriation of mainstream discourse about the importance of employment and having a strong work ethic. Support was tempered by the realities of the faltering economy, labor market discrimination, and child care and transportation problems.

Everyone said that they wanted to work rather than receive welfare (or in some cases, rather than engage in criminal activities), at least as an eventual goal. Others argued in support of work simply because they believed that the amount of money one received on welfare was not enough to make ends meet.

As Monica (age 18)—who moved from welfare to an internship and then to a permanent administrative job at a large investment company—put it, "If you can work, just work. It's better than bein' on welfare." Gabriela expressed similar sentiments and contrasted her own work ethic with that of her baby's father, Mike (an SSI recipient), whom she was in the process of divorcing after only a few months of marriage. She explained:

> I mean, Mike, he's the type of person, he could sit on his ass for the rest of his life and collect money from the government. He has no problem with that. No problem with that. Me, I have to be doin' something. I like to work anyway. I have to know I'm makin' a difference, that I'm doin' something positive...I'd rather work for money than sit and have it given to me.

Although study participants were not being forced into the labor market yet, they believed that the expectation was reasonable and, ultimately, positive for people on welfare. Aaliyah (age 20) explained how, despite an initial "sky is falling" reaction to welfare reform, she now believed that a work requirement would benefit young women and their children. She went on to describe her personal support for work requirements:

> I think it's a good idea. Just, just in my personal life, just in the way they're doin' it, it's like, the people that don't wanna work, it forces *them* to sort of get up and look for jobs, it really does. And, even the people that are tryin' to work their way off of welfare, I think it gives it more structure. I think it helps a lot more because that way you're *not enabled*, you know what I mean? To just sit and you know, let years pass you by.

Aaliyah's comments demonstrated how pervasive dominant welfare discourse and the unconscious practice of "othering" are, even among a population that receives cash benefits.

During the course of the study, participants went through the range of experiences that accompany labor market participation. Some of the youth were actively looking for jobs

or already working. Some participants obtained jobs while another lost his. Contrary to what many of the stereotypes suggest about an unwillingness among welfare-reliant young mothers to seek and sustain employment, most participants had already developed a work history, inasmuch as a teenager is able to given school commitments and the limited range of employment opportunities available. Their jobs tended to be clustered in the service (e.g., fast food, drug stores, retail) and administrative (e.g., telemarketing, secretarial) sectors, and many had also worked with children. Several entered training programs (e.g., medical assistant, nursing, cosmetology) during the study; others hoped to do so after finishing their GEDs.

These findings suggest that participants in the study seemed to be "getting the message" of welfare reform and that they agreed with some of its basic tenets, at least on the surface. Interview data also demonstrated how easily participants were able to parrot mainstream truisms on topics such as self-sufficiency and personal responsibility. However, the next section will provide some examples of how complex the lives of these adolescents were, often rendering their support for welfare reform in theory an impossibility in practical terms. I present data on two contextual issues (i.e. health and drugs) that had major effects on participants' lives. Significantly, most participants had experienced multiple issues of this sort, either incrementally while growing up, or in some cases, in "real-time" during the course of the study.

Contextual Factors

In the discursive mainstream of welfare policy, there is an under-appreciation of the ways that health and disability-related issues affect young parents in poverty. Even in this small sample of fourteen Boston teens, this theme emerged over and over again. For instance, Luz (age 21) had reproductive health problems that required surgery and ultimately forced her to leave a job. Both Gabriela and Missy (age 20) had children with significant special health care needs. Gabriela's baby had to stay in the hospital for about five months after his birth due to a problem with the growth of his internal organs; eventually, he was expected to develop normally. Missy's son

was born with a serious congenital birth defect; he required constant care and his condition would not improve with age. Several of the other young women in the study experienced pregnancies riddled with complications. Mental health issues were also highly prevalent, particularly among the families and partners of individuals in the study.

Substance abuse and drug selling were major factors in the lives of these urban youth, although the ways in which drugs played out in their lives varied. Selling drugs was a recurrent story in the interviews—several participants had either sold drugs themselves or were involved with someone who had done so. Not surprisingly, the main reason why participants and their associates started selling drugs was because of the financial gain available. The temptation to sell drugs was never far removed because there were always older people looking for young people to sell or hold drugs for them. There was also a perception that it was very difficult to get a job and that, once in a job, the pay would be extremely low. As Luz said, "You sell a rock, that's forty dollars right there. Just for one rock. Two-second work." From Ricky's (age 18) point of view, drug selling was a necessity for survival. He had disengaged from his parents at a very young age and spent a significant amount of time on the streets. Selling drugs and engaging in other illegal activities were some of the few things he felt he could do to support himself. This way of life got Ricky into some very serious trouble and danger as a teenager—so much so that his father sent him to New York to get away from gang members who wanted to harm him. He explained it this way:

> Back in the day, when I was younger, I used to always just, like I used to pump. I used to be selling all the time. 'Cause most of the time when I was younger, you know, my parents wasn't really there for me. Like my mother, she was always doin' something else and my father he was always getting locked up. So, you know, I had no way to eat. Or survive. So I had to, you know, do everything—steal, sell drugs, steal cars and sell 'em by parts. Everything.

Participants had also been affected by the user's end of

drug dealing. In this sample, several had family members, partners or friends that were affected by substance abuse. Aaliyah, for example, lost her mother to drug use when she was only sixteen. Her boyfriend was also a drug dealer, although she claimed not to know this until late in their relationship. Luz's mother was also addicted to drugs. Gabriela's husband came from a family with a lot of drug use (including his mother, whom Gabriela referred to as a "pill junkie") and he himself smoked a lot of marijuana. Even when participants were not directly involved in drug selling or drug use, others' activities had strongly negative consequences, making indelible marks on their life trajectories.

Structural Issues

Many of the challenges described above are often explained in policy debate as individual "life histories"—troubling and unfortunate, but ultimately tied to a specific person's background. They may seem to be important contextual backdrops, but still within the domain of *individual* experiences and/or "choices." However, in the interviews, there were also many references to macro-level structures and institutional arrangements (i.e., state and national economy, labor market, educational system) that directly shaped participants' experiences and viewpoints with respect to welfare reform policies. For instance, despite the fact that many participants agreed in theory with two of welfare reform's main provisions—time limits and work requirements—their experiences with larger structural issues problematized the authenticity of that support. For instance, consider Gabriela's description of a relative's experience with time limits:

> Like, my Aunt, she was stressin' out because her two years were up but the training that they had given her, there *weren't a lot of jobs* open in that field. And also, they weren't payin' enough. 'Cause, you know, they were tellin' her you're gonna have to pay for insurance, this and that. And, like, the jobs that were open in her field, they were *too far away* or they *weren't paying enough*. So it wouldn't even be worth it.

Despite the fact that Gabriela was talking about a very individualized instance of how time limits could affect one's life, she weaved in some of the most important structural issues to which welfare reform critics frequently point—a faltering economy based on jobs that are few in number, lack health insurance, do not pay enough, and are geographically unreachable.

One of the major problems confronting study participants was the changing nature of the economy and increased competition for jobs. This was true even in the retail and services sectors, which is where most participants were targeting their job search. Several of the participants expressed extreme frustration in regard to finding employment. Ricky, for example, had a job at a drugstore chain when I first interviewed him in the Fall of 2002. By the time we talked again a few months later, he had been fired. When asked how the job search was going, he gave me a simple answer: "Horrible." Compounding Ricky's difficulties was the fact that he had a criminal record and had spent time in jail. This illustrates another structural problem, that of the juvenile justice system. As he explained:

> I get mad because the system, it's all one big circle. As long as you don't get locked up, you can get a job. But if you get locked up, for stealing or for selling drugs or whatever, and you come out...they make it impossible for you to get a job so you gotta go back to the criminal life.

Similar problems were found in the educational sphere. For example, the alternative education system in Boston had become increasingly stressed as a result of state government's budget cuts in education and social service spending. The need for educational services for English as a Second Language (ESL) students was rapidly on the rise. As an educational staff member at CFS summarized, "The demand for that is absolutely huge and the supply is just not even close." So, while mandatory school attendance requirements were one of the least contentious of welfare reform issues, the structural problems experienced by a diverse and economically struggling city represented serious roadblocks between intended and

actual welfare reform outcomes.

This study included both male and female respondents to gain a sense of how public policy with an arguably gendered nature and history might differentially affect urban youth based on their sex. While the life stories of all participants were quite complex and largely shaped by the effects of urban poverty, the women in particular faced enormous challenges at the personal and social levels that were only exacerbated in light of welfare reform policies. The personal responsibilities they had already taken on in life often clashed directly with the mandates of reform. For instance, while many of the young mothers in the study were dealing with various requirements of reform, such as mandatory school attendance, they were also responsible for the majority of care work in the household. And for most, this was not new or simply a result of becoming parents at a young age, as they had been forced to take on many adult responsibilities long before having their own children (e.g., taking care of younger siblings, working part-time jobs, and cooking/cleaning). Some of the specific policy provisions were particularly difficult for women, even when not directed squarely at them. For example, they were required to provide information about the fathers of their children for the child support enforcement rules, but this made their interpersonal relationships with the men in their lives even more perilous because they feared physical or emotional retaliation. In addition to these challenges that resided in the private spheres of their lives, the women faced larger, structural issues such as gender discrimination and wage inequality in the labor market

Discussion

Accepting welfare reform in theory is not the same as being able to comply with reform efforts in practice. In listening to the life stories of low-income urban adolescents, it quickly became apparent that they had lived incredibly complex, and often difficult, lives. Their circumstances were not the result of one bad decision. Rather, the situations they found themselves in by the time they reached young adulthood were caused by a lifelong accumulation of disadvantage. These circumstances

shaped the context in which the various welfare reform provisions were being experienced by participants and, to a large extent, influenced the policy's effects.

Noted here and in other research, the discourse of welfare reform—personal responsibility (good), dependency (bad), illegitimacy (very bad)—served as the underlying and unquestioned logic of policy provisions like time limits and work requirements. Admittedly, the low-income adolescents participating in this study had no problem speaking in this language—at least at first. Structural explanations of poverty abounded in the life stories of these urban adolescents, but their ability to articulate them was often overwhelmed by their appropriation of dominant welfare discourse. Teens affected by these policies were able to begin to deconstruct these narratives of poverty and welfare *only* through the telling of their own stories, their everyday experiences. Helping to amplify the voices behind these stories is one of the most valuable contributions that the qualitative research community can make. Policy analysis and evaluation framed within an interpretivist paradigm and supported by diverse forms of social inquiry can open up discursive space for alternative framings of poverty and welfare and promote a more deliberative form of policy debate.

The complex social environment described by adolescents in this study and shaped by structural elements of poverty was not accounted for adequately in the planning of welfare reform policy. More than ten years later, we find that many proclamations of welfare reform's triumph are correspondingly simplistic and unidimensional. This has resulted in large part because of a research industry that asked a narrow set of questions and employed a similarly constricted group of methods to answer policy questions which were, from the beginning, established to be almost self-fulfilling. For instance, as Cancian noted several years ago, "If the goal of welfare reform is to reduce the number of families receiving benefits, then time limits and other restrictions mean that the current reforms will, almost by definition, be successful" (2001, p. 312). Most research on welfare reform did not include holistic accounts of women's "on the ground" experiences of the everyday; it atomized their lives into certain behavioral indicators rather than in relation to macro-level issues like wage decline, gender discrimination,

and lack of jobs.

Future research needs to include a broader set of methodological approaches and disciplinary perspectives in order to: (1) more fully understand the real impact of welfare reform on the lives of the poor; and, (2) to help shape a policy agenda that tackles poverty in light of numerous contextual factors. Inquiry must move beyond the same types of descriptive research questions (which generally ask "how many") that have characterized welfare research for the past quarter century (McClintock & Lowe, 2007). The research industry as a whole must realize that "studying poverty is not the same thing as studying the poor" (O'Connor, p. 22). Ultimately, examining the long-term effects of welfare reform will require more than tabulating administrative data. Better understanding the lives of the poor from their perspectives and at the level of everyday experience is critical for developing policies that challenge the structural factors of poverty which encircle welfare discourse.

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